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**HEADLINE:** HMO 'patient access' approved by the House

**BYLINE:** Compiled by Sun staff writer John A. Morris from staff and wire reports.

**BODY:**

The House of Delegates last night approved legislation designed to ensure that patients in health maintenance organizations may see physicians outside their HMO networks, although the patients would have to pay any difference in cost.

House Bill 724 also tries to protect HMO patients from suddenly losing their doctor. It would require as much as 90 days of additional coverage after an employer switches to another health insurance company, or after a doctor leaves an HMO to practice elsewhere.

"This is a step in the right direction," said Del. Michael Busch, an Anne Arundel County Democrat who chairs the Economic Matters Committee, which drafted the controversial "patient access" bill.

The bill sets out the specific process that HMOs would have to follow in reviewing applications from doctors seeking to join their networks, including a requirement that they respond in writing to applications within 60 days. Doctors had complained of being turned down but never being told why.

The measure also would prohibit insurers from discriminating against physicians based on gender, race, age, religion, national origin or disability. African-American doctors have complained they are excluded from joining networks in communities where they long have practiced.

The bill, passed 115-20, now moves to the Senate, which has yet to vote on similar measures pending there. Mr. Busch predicted the Senate would go along with the House bill.

Wide-ranging tax cuts get delegates' nod

Cuts in business and consumer taxes that could save taxpayers as much as \$ 50 million a year were approved yesterday by the House of Delegates.

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The bill would eliminate several taxes, including the sales tax on snack foods such as chips and pretzels that was enacted during the recession to help balance the state budget.

The bill, approved 137-1, includes the business tax cuts the governor proposed to help improve the state's economic development climate.

The only opposition came from Del. Leon G. Billings, D-Montgomery, who said that given uncertainties about possible cuts in federal aid, "it is premature for us to enact this tax cut."

The Senate has approved some of the same tax reductions, but the measures proposed by the two houses are not identical.

The biggest item in the House bill would exempt leased vehicles from the sales tax. Compared with other states, relatively few vehicles are leased in Maryland because the tax is so high, officials said.

The bill would repeal the 5 percent tax on snack foods and give a tax exemption for computers and other equipment used by research and development firms. It would give tax breaks to businesses for hiring welfare recipients and for using vehicles that run on electricity or other clean fuels.

Senate approves bill on 'notoriety of crime'

The Senate moved unanimously yesterday to prevent criminals from profiting from their notoriety through, among other things, the sale of movie and book rights.

Under Senate 492, which now goes to the House, criminal defendants would be barred from spending the profits from "notoriety of crime" contracts before their victims could be compensated.

The bill would require the participants in such a contract to provide the details to a state victims board within 30 days after its execution. With that information, victims could ask a court to freeze the money while they seek civil damages.

Maryland has had a "Son of Sam" law for several years. However, the state Court of Appeals weakened the measure in 1993 when it ruled that former Anne Arundel County teacher Ronald W. Price, who was convicted of abusing three students, did not have to reveal the details of a made-for-television movie contract to the state or the victims.

The law is named after New York serial killer David Berkowitz, who referred to himself as "Son of Sam." Berkowitz made a lucrative book deal that led to legislation in New York barring criminals from profiting from their crimes.

Notification measure gets Senate approval

A measure to require community notification when a child sexual offender is released from prison received unanimous approval from the Senate yesterday.

Senate Bill 79, which now goes to the House, would require judicial and corrections officials to notify police in the jurisdiction where a child sexual offender will reside upon release from prison or work release.

It also would require offenders to send a written notice to their new neighbors within 30 days after being released from prison. Such offenders would have to register every year for 10 years with the local police department, which could then notify civic, religious and youth organizations.

The registration would include a photograph, fingerprints and a description of the conviction. A central registry of

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all child sexual offenders living in Maryland would be maintained by State Police.

Similar registration proposals have been adopted in 40 states.

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